

[By Patrick McArdle](#)

Congressman Peter Welch was in Bennington on Monday to announce his plans to co-sponsor a bill that would extend Vermont's successful veterans outreach program across the nation at an estimated cost of about \$70 million.

According to Welch, the program started when Sen. Bernard Sanders met with Vermont National Guard officials and learned of the need for a program in which soldiers returning from deployment would be assisted in making the adjustment by other veterans.

"When (soldiers) are, in theory, basically in enormous danger, they have each other and as tough as it is, they have that bond to help one another get through it. Suddenly, they're not deployed anymore. They're scattered. They're in rural areas. As much as we care, none of us have walked in the shoes of those soldiers. They face a lot of challenges," he said.

Sanders secured an earmark to fund the program which started in 2007 in Vermont. Welch said it had proven valuable in a number of ways and he gave examples including helping one soldier and his family apply for financial assistance and guiding another soldier to treatment for pneumonia, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thomas Drew, the deputy adjutant general of the Vermont National Guard, said the program had started as a way of "serving the service member" by connecting veterans to agencies like the Veterans Administration or private organizations.

"It doesn't matter what the problem is. ... We contact the veteran upon his or her return from deployment, talk to them. Sometimes that's all it takes, a veteran talking to a veteran When there's an identified problem, our specialists are trained and have the knowledge to link that individual to someone that can help solve the problem," he said.

According to Drew, the outreach program has been in contact with more than 2,700 returning soldiers since it began.

Welch made the announcement at the veterans' outreach and family resource center at the Vermont Veterans Home in Bennington. Thomas Burke, of Bennington, who served in the Vermont National Guard for more than 30 years said the outreach program had helped him and his son adjust after they returned from Afghanistan.

"Times are tough for these young soldiers returning. They have trouble communicating with their families and readjusting. There's a lot of depression. It's because of the up-tempo of the mission and coming back to a more relaxed atmosphere," Burke said.

Welch called the estimated \$70 million cost "money well-spent" and said the money would be enough to serve the whole country because many who participate will be volunteers.

"The cost of the war, in my view, always has to include the cost of taking care of the warrior," he said.

Because of the elimination of congressional earmarks, Welch said funding would have to be found for the program. He suggested the elimination of ethanol subsidies would pay for the program, which is expected to be an ongoing effort.

Drew said Welch planned to add a line item to the federal budget so it will be funded annually. Money would be distributed to state national guards as needed, Drew said.

Welch plans to co-introduce the legislation with Rep. Chris Gibson, a New York Republican who is also an Army Airborne veteran.